

Roll Down, Justice!

“Unbind Him.”

John 11:1-44

This week we crossed the halfway point in this season of Lent. This forty-day part of the year that began on Ash Wednesday and ends at Easter is not only about this “Roll Down, Justice” theme in worship; it’s also a pilgrimage. Lent, every year, invites us to walk in Jesus’ footsteps toward God’s experience of death...and from there to new life. This season invites us to think about what that cycle—that promise—looks like in our own lives.

We’re halfway there, which means—if we imagine ourselves in that other time and place—that some in the crowds that have been following Jesus are beginning to get agitated by his edginess. For some, he’s a little too willing to violate the rules. His saying “It doesn’t have to be like this,” has started to seem a little dangerous. They’ve gotten a glimpse that he may not be just a kindly miracle worker, a healer of the sick, a food supplier to the hungry. There’s some message that’s driving him—about change, about how the world is not yet as it should be. You know about how that kind of change can look: Pretty unsettling. Pretty dangerous.

All four Gospel writers—Matthew, Mark, Luke, John—trace a growing conflict between Jesus and the people who hold both religious and political power. In the stories of Jesus that Mark and Matthew and Luke wrote, it was the cleansing of the Temple that tipped those people over into wanting him gone. When he got outraged about the profits being made in the Temple courtyard—mad enough to shout and knock over tables—he crossed the line between annoyance and danger in his enemies’ minds. They began to plot against him, to work on how they could take this rabble-rouser out of circulation before he did any more damage to their institutions.

The Gospel of John tells the story a little bit differently. In John’s story, it was Jesus raising Lazarus—a dead man—back to life that frightened people enough about his power, that they began to plot against him. *This* was the event that gathered a great crowd around Jesus on Palm Sunday. It was also the thing that convinced the establishment that they had to break the momentum that was gathering around this so-called Savior.

You heard the story this morning. Lazarus wasn’t just another random person who needed healing; he was Jesus’ friend. Lazarus and his sisters Mary and Martha show up several times in Jesus’ story. He’s at their house for dinner regularly. So of course the sisters sent word to Jesus when Lazarus got sick. It must have surprised them a little when Jesus didn’t drop everything else to rush back. By the time he got there, Lazarus had already died.

Martha meets Jesus at the gate, and he says the words that we usually focus on in this story: “I am the resurrection and the life...Everyone who believes in me will never die.” Do you believe me? he asks her. Martha has heard words like these—religious comfort food—since she was a child. “Yeah, I know he will rise again—be in heaven—on the last day.” Her answer comes out something like, “Sure, I believe.” But I’m quite sure she was thinking, “Believe what? How can you say that you can make people never die? I don’t want to hear empty, spiritual-sounding promises. My brother is lying over there in a tomb, because you weren’t here to heal him.”

And then the story gets even less spiritual-sounding. Jesus is moved to tears as he realizes his friend is gone. “Jesus wept” is what the Gospel says. He says, “Show me where you’ve put my friend Lazarus.” They walk over to the tomb, which is how they buried people in those days: they put the body in a cave dug out of rocky soil, and they put a big rock in front of it to seal it off. “Take the stone away,” Jesus says.

Are you kidding? Martha says; he’s been dead four days! It’s already begun to stink in there. You can’t just open it up like that.

But they did. It probably took a few people, and I imagine they moved pretty reluctantly. But they rolled the big stone away from the hole in the ground. Jesus lowers his head and prays for a moment, and then he says, loudly, confidently, “Lazarus, come out!”

I wonder what that moment felt like. I imagine it was full of tension, anxiety. What if nothing happened? (as they probably expected) This could be a very awkward moment. Jesus had already embarrassed himself by arriving too late to help his friend. Now what was he doing, thinking he was in charge of life and death, exposing himself to the likelihood that he would disappoint Lazarus’ loved ones again?

I can almost see those still-frustrated and skeptical and slightly angry people inching their way backwards—not only because of the awkwardness of this scene, but because of the smell. A body had been sealed-up in a cave in a hot climate for four days. They held their breath.

And then, to their shock, Lazarus stumbles out of the cave. Not with some angelic shimmering light around him, but dragging the same strips of cloth they’d wrapped his body in days earlier.

“Unbind him,” Jesus says to Lazarus’ family and neighbors. “Unbind him and let him go.” Why didn’t Jesus just finish the job himself? Clearly the guy who has enough power to raise someone from death to life had the capacity to make the burial cloths drop away. But he didn’t do that. Jesus said to the people who are just barely with him in this moment, “I gave him life, but you’re the ones who have the power to set him free from the ties that held him in that tomb. Unbind him. Let him go.”

Releasing people from restraints is not miracle work. It’s people work, community work. Maybe this story is as much about *our* work as it is about Jesus’ power to raise people from the dead. Maybe the story of Lazarus is a call to *us* to do the messy, smelly work of releasing people, disrupting unjust systems that have held them in place. Our job to free them from the confining boxes that prejudice and fear have put them in.

On Friday morning, I had a chance to hear Ruby Bridges speak. Ruby Bridges is the now-62-year-old woman who was the first black student to attend William Frantz public school in New Orleans. Until then that school had been fully segregated—reserved for only white students. In 1960, Ruby crossed a very solid color line in New Orleans, and she helped launch this country’s civil rights movement.

Ruby was six years old on the day federal marshals walked with her past an angry crowd and into the doors of a school that did not want her to come. She told the story of how her parents had volunteered to have her, along with maybe a hundred other black children, take an intelligence test to see if she ‘qualified’ to participate in de-segregating Louisiana’s schools. Ruby did well on the test. She wasn’t sure exactly what that meant, but neighbors and friends came to the house to congratulate Ruby and her parents on how smart she was. No one explained to Ruby what was about to happen; she was too young to understand.

But a six year old does what the rest of us do when there are gaps in our information. She filled them in. She figured out that passing the test meant that she was so smart, she was going to skip right from kindergarten to college. And so when the federal marshals came to the front door and walked with her into a strange building that was full of mean-looking adults, she thought this must be what college looks like. And because white families held their children out of that school for weeks in protest, it took a long time for Ruby to realize that this wasn't a place just for adults and her; that there were other children who also went to school there.

Ruby Bridges talked about the kindness of the people who helped her be brave through those dark, scary days. Her parents, federal police agents, a few important teachers along the way. She told a story of another first grader, a little boy, who said to her, "My mom told me I can't play with you;" and how hearing that honesty opened some understanding up for her, because she realized that she wouldn't have disobeyed that kind of instruction from her parents either.

"Unbind her. Let her go." That's not God's work. That's our work.

One more story. My friend Dan Sturdivant is a pastor in San Ramon. A church where he used to serve had a ministry called Kaleidoscope, which promised cancer patients in the community that they would not be left alone through their cancer treatment. Kaleidoscope volunteers would sit with people through hours of chemotherapy, be on call in the middle of the night, when nausea hit.

One day a man named Ed walked into the Kaleidoscope office. Ed wasn't a church member. He'd lived a hard life—drugs, prison, divorce—but he'd finally cleaned himself up, started down what he thought was a fresh path. And just the day before he came to the church, a doctor had told him that he had cancer. Dan greeted him, and Ed told him his story. Dan listened and responded the way we learned in seminary to reassure people in moments of despair. "Whatever you have to go through, God will be with you," Dan said. "God loves you."

Usually when you say nice words like that, people smile and nod their heads even if they think it's meaningless. But this guy had no time for being pacified. He stood up and shouted, "What the hell difference does it make if God loves me? What does that even mean?" Dan was taken aback, a little speechless. And then he said, "I don't know what it means. But I know this, Ed. I know *I* love you."

Something broke in that moment. Something hard and calcified by years of pain and defensiveness cracked open inside of Ed. Those Kaleidoscope folks stayed with him through several months of cancer treatment. His heart softened. He died a good and peaceful death, surrounded by people who cared for him.

"Unbind him. Let him go."

Lazarus' friends—his community—completed the act of resurrection that Jesus started. That's what Jesus told them to do. Maybe it's what he tells us to do too: to unbind people. To roll up our sleeves and walk right into the stinky, unattractive places where people are tangled up and stuck. Places where a word of human forgiveness or an honest connection or a willingness to come along beside might complete the work of bringing new life.

Maybe this is what Jesus meant when he said, "Follow—come right behind me." That's where the world needs you.